

This Month in Moravian History

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A Little Spark: Samuel Isles in Antigua

In April the Moravian Church in Antigua celebrates 250 years of fruitful work and witness. The Moravian Archives wishes to join in this celebration by devoting our April newsletter to the first missionary to Antigua, Samuel Isles.



Samuel Isles (1723-1764) was born in Yorkshire, England and felt called to ministry as a young child. He found little encouragement until he heard Peter Böhler preach in 1742 and his "heart got some sensation and knowledge of our Saviour." From that point on Isles deepened his acquaintance with the Moravians, living in Moravian communities in England and Germany until called to mission service in 1748.

When one reads Isles' personal letters and his memoir, one is struck by several things: the hardships he suffered during his short life of 41 years, the human response to his troubles, and finally his faith in God that caused him to persevere in the bleakest circumstances. His story, and the story of the Moravian church in Antigua, is not a mission fairytale, but rather a story of perseverance against all odds.

Isles' mission work from the beginning was met with adversity. On his first journey to the island of St. Thomas as a lay preacher, Isles' ship was waylaid twice by pirates. Eight years later on April 2, 1756, Isles arrived in Antigua with his wife, Molly. The next day the entire island of Antigua came under threat of attack. Rather than bear arms, Isles hid in their rented room until danger had passed. Essentially *nothing* appeared in Isles' favor at first. He lacked money, work, lodging, and most importantly - access to the black slaves he came to convert.

It is no wonder that in a letter from Peter Böhler to Isles dated September 11, 1756, we read the following: "The Brethren here tell me that your letters...are very melancholy, because you find it hard for yourself to come through and also you meet with greater difficulties in your chief design to preach the gospel of our dear Lord Jesus Christ to the Negroes."

Through sheer ingenuity and faith in God's plan, Isles made a way for himself in Antigua. He took up gardening, and his wife sewing, in order to support themselves. In May Isles found favor with the Rossington family, who eventually allowed him to meet with slaves on their plantation. This success cheered Isles. In a letter to Isles only a year and a half later, Spangenberg comments: "I do observe with comfort that the Lords' work among the Negroes continues in Antioe. A little spark may make a great fire, and small beginnings may have a wonderful effect at last."

A great fire indeed! For 250 years Isles' little spark has fueled one of the most fruitful and faithful missions within the Moravian Church, as well producing the first ordained black minister, John Buckley in 1856. For their anniversary celebrations the Moravian Church in Antigua has adopted the theme: "Establishing, Educating and Empowering People for God" - the same basic principles under which Isles worked. Isles' lasting mission is yet another testament to how God uses the most unlikely disciples to "wonderful effect."

Sources: Dienerblätter; Samuel Isles Papers in the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem PA; Müller, Karl. *200 Jahre Brüdermission Herrnhut*, 1931; Vernon Nelson, "Samuel Isles, First Moravian Missionary on Antigua" in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, 21 (1966): 3-27.

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